

Avoiding Pitfalls to Full Scale Implementation

There are several pitfalls that schools must avoid if they want to develop an effective RtI process. **First school leaders need to build awareness and understanding of RtI in their school.** Building awareness and understanding goes beyond defining RtI and demonstrating practices associated with RtI. It involves helping others to see

- a) The need for RtI (e.g., how schools have not met the needs of students who struggle but who do not meet former discrepancy criteria)
- b) How it relates to other mandates (e.g., No Child Left Behind and Adequate Yearly Progress)
- c) How it relates to shared values in the school (e.g., that every child should receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education)
- d) How it intersects with other practices going on in the building (e.g. how an existing problem-solving team structure can be used as a part of the process)

Many innovations fail because school personnel lack clarity about what they are and what they involve. **Another pitfall, however, is when there is false clarity, in which an innovation is oversimplified and people think they understand what to do when in reality they do not grasp the complexity and intricacies of the new innovation.** In the case of RtI, false clarity will result if schools jump ahead too quickly to eligibility determination models when other practices are not yet in place (e.g. data-based problem solving).

Procedural Integrity

The term “procedural integrity” refers to the degree to which specified RtI procedures are implemented as planned. For some children, the end result of RtI means verification for special education or related services. Therefore, it is essential that the procedures and core RtI components be correctly and consistently applied. Missing steps or incorrectly followed procedures may invalidate the process for a student. Only when RtI procedures are implemented with high levels of procedural integrity (consistency) can data be used for eligibility decision-making.

Procedural integrity should be monitored by putting safeguards in place that increase accountability for accurate procedural implementation. Detailed record keeping is essential to document levels of procedural integrity for each child and to monitor a school’s implementation strengths and weaknesses across cases. In monitoring procedural integrity, a checklist can be developed which includes the substantive procedural steps of the RtI process. Besides reflecting best practice, the steps also should safeguard children’s rights. At a minimum, the RtI procedural checklist should address:

1. Legal and ethical requirements
2. Assessment needs, including screening, baseline, and ongoing progress monitoring
3. Goal setting and plan development
4. Treatment integrity monitoring
5. Plan evaluation
6. Planning and outcomes of decision-making meetings

Implementation of each step is recorded by team members and/or an assigned case manager and the date of completion for each step is noted. In this way, accountability is maintained and case progress is monitored and recorded.

The emphasis for school teams is to complete each step in the RtI process with the highest levels of integrity. If one or more steps are not being completed or are completed with low integrity, school personnel must investigate why and correct the situation. The process as a whole is just as important as any one step. The educational decisions being made about students through this process significantly alter their educational future. If the process is not completed as designed, the children's education may suffer

Fragmentation

Fragmentation of services represents another significant pitfall to effective implementation of RtI. Fragmentation occurs when professionals end up doing their job in isolation from one another. For eligibility determination, it was easier when the school psychologist could call a student to his or her office to administer intelligence and achievement tests. The discrepancy that was calculated did not rely on coordinated efforts across personnel, which made it more convenient. But, it was the students who failed to benefit from this error-prone practice. Schools can avoid the pitfall of fragmented services by developing active stakeholder participation across a broad variety of roles, including administration, teachers (both regular education and special education), related service personnel, specialists, coordinators, and parents. Without broad, active involvement, each person in a different role will go about his or her business and a comprehensive response to the child's needs will not occur. Doing RtI well requires tighter and more integrated coordination of services.

School Readiness

Perhaps the most critical pitfall (and one that cuts across all those already described) is adopting an innovation prematurely; that is, before there is an adequate infrastructure for an innovation. There are several conditions that must already exist before schools are ready to implement RtI, including:

- A school-wide awareness, understanding, and knowledge of the rationale for and structural elements of RtI.
- A functioning team leadership for RtI at the level of the school building, including someone who serves as a coordinator at the building level.
- An integration of services across roles and personnel across all levels of service delivery.

Each of these features is related to one or more of the pitfalls to effective change. RtI requires school-wide "buy-in" and understanding. But, there must be a functioning team that will take leadership with coordinating efforts (i.e., training and institutionalizing new procedures) throughout the school. The team must be sure that services are integrated across roles and personnel, lest RtI fall into the fragmentation. Finally, schools need to create an infrastructure supporting the practices carried out at all levels of service delivery. This infrastructure includes resources, professional development, ongoing case and data management, assessment and evaluation activities, and intervention services.